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AN ADDRESS ON
Compulsory Education,

GIVEN BEFORE

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND SCHOOL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
FOR WEST KENT,

FEBRUARY 11, 1871,

BY

RICHARD GARDNER,

MASTER OF THE TONBRIDGE NATIONAL SCHOOL.

DEDICATED BY PERMISSION TO

J. G. TALBOT, Esq., M.P.,

PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION.

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PREFACE.

I have been requested by several gentlemen interested in the education of the poor, to issue in the form of a pamphlet an Address on Compulsory Education, which I recently gave before the Church of England School Teachers' Association for West Kent. The President of the Society, J. G. Talbot, Esq., M.P., a gentleman well known for his zeal and self-denying labours in the extension of religious education, has been pleased to accept the dedication; and so far as it regards the absolute necessity of some system of compulsion to render the education of our country national in fact, as well as in name, he cordially endorses the opinions I have expressed. As a national school master, I feel fully convinced that large numbers of children, notwithstanding the Education Act, will grow up in ignorance, and many more through the irregularity of their attendance will still receive an education unworthy of the name, unless some scheme is adopted to make attendance at school universally compulsory. One object of the following address was to show how such a plan could be devised without interfering with the management of our existing denominational schools.

R. G.

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THE subject of National Education has engrossed a considerable share of public attention during the past eventful year. The education of the poor is now regarded as an absolute necessity. The opinion of the people of England has wonderfully changed upon this question of the education of the poor. Not many years ago the popular fallacy was very prevalent that if the lower strata of the population were released from their bonds of ignorance, it would tend to disorganise the normal condition of society. Reverence for superiors would be abolished, servants would wish to become masters, and the poor would be discontented with their station in life. Now, we regard the vast amount of ignorance which everywhere exists, as a national misfortune detrimental to the true interests of our country ; and

strenuous efforts have been made, both in and out of Parliament, to establish a thorough system of national education. The Education Act, recently become law, is a palpable indication of the recognised fact that the people must be educated.

Now I maintain that any scheme originated to educate the poor children of our land, should be universal in its application to them. Every child capable of being taught should be educated. It is well known that in numerous cases, it is useless to *offer* education. To the minds of some members during the debates in Parliament, this *offering* of education was deemed a sufficient panacea to dispel the ignorance of our land. But we may provide an adequate number of schoolrooms, and a sufficient and efficient staff of teachers—we may even go further and offer education gratuitously,—and still large numbers of our children will not be educated. Writers in the daily journals have asserted that the voluntary system has failed. Why has it failed? Simply because there is no law to compel children to attend school. So, too, will the rating system fail to educate the children of our country, unless every board uses its powers of compulsion. For what does it matter whether the schools are built and supported by the rates or by voluntary subscriptions, so that they *are* built and supported. To make education national in every sense of the word, and to obliterate even a residuum of ignorance, some system of compulsion must be resorted to. Parents must be compelled to send their children to school.

In order to substantiate these assertions, I will examine a few of the causes which keep children from school.

1st.—I believe the most fruitful source of all to be the apathy of the parents. So much ignorance and its natural companions, poverty and vice, exist among the lower classes, that having no education themselves they do not see the necessity of it for their children. Many say, “I have got along through life without knowing how to read or write, and so can my children.” They are also so absorbed in obtaining the bare necessities of life, or in the gratification of their sensual desires,—for, alas! in many, the life of the mind is torpid or dead—that they are entirely careless about the education of their children. Hence, the children of such parents never go to school, and never will, unless they are compelled by the power of the law. Do we not see every day numbers of children running about during school hours? But some will say—this system of compulsion will interfere

with the rights and liberties of the parent. But I maintain that every child is being educated, either in what is good or in what is evil—for a child's mind is most impressionable—and if he is not at school learning that which is right and useful to make him a good citizen, he is learning in the streets and lanes that which will in all probability make him a burden or an enemy to society. If it is admitted that every child should be educated, in order that he may exercise more judiciously any political rights he may eventually possess, and be more competent to earn his living, so that he may more probably become a support to the State, instead of an incumbrance, then, I say it is a political crime to deprive him of education, and those whose duty it is to provide it for him, ought, for this neglect, to be amenable to the power of the law, as an offence against the well-being of the commonwealth. Therefore no one should possess the power to deprive a child of that education, which will make him more useful and noble as a human being, and a benefit, rather than an incumbrance, to his fatherland.

2nd.—There is also a class of parents who, though they profess to send their children to school, yet realise so feebly the advantages their children derive, that they keep them away for the most trivial causes. I find in the Government Report (Education) for 1870, there were 1,569,139 children on the registers of inspected schools, while the average attendance was only 1,062,999, or about one-third of those children who actually go to school are absent every day. In some places, particularly in agricultural districts, the proportion of absentees is much greater. It is this irregularity of attendance which produces the teacher's greatest difficulty, and prevents our elementary schools obtaining that high state of advancement and efficiency to be found in the schools of Germany and Switzerland. Here again, therefore, I say regularity of attendance will only be accomplished by compulsion.

3rd.—Another cause which prevents many children attending school is the poverty of their parents. The wages of their children is to them an absolute necessity. A man who earns 15s. per week and has half-a-dozen olive branches to support, cannot be expected to do without the wages of those children who are able to perform such labour as is suited to their early years. For these poor children there is no school-life, or very little ; they have to face so young the hardships of life, and to learn so soon that by the “ sweat of his brow ” a man

must eat bread. Now it has been ascertained that very few children under twelve are regularly employed day by day ; and more especially is this the case in agricultural districts, where no laws affecting the labour of children at present exist. They work for a period of a few days, or it may be of a few weeks, and when their employment ceases, instead of attending school, they are allowed to roam about, not uneducated, alas !—for there is no such thing as an uneducated child—but receiving such an education as blunts and vitiates their minds. They possess no opportunity, in the spring-time of life, for receiving those seeds of knowledge which in their after life would probably bring forth a harvest of good to themselves and their country. Therefore, I conclude, that compulsion is essential for this class of children, yet not such a rigid system as would entirely deprive the parents of the wages or labour of their children ; for this deprivation is the only objection that can be substantially raised against compulsion.

4th.—Then, as you all know, there are some children who set the authority of their parents at defiance. More particularly is this the case when the father is dead, and the poor mother has to be the bread-winner of her children. She may wish them to attend school, but her persuasions are useless. Here again the lawlessness of the children should be coerced by the power of the law.

That a universal system of compulsion is necessary in order that all our children may be educated, is now being reluctantly admitted. With a plentiful supply of schools, and an efficient staff of teachers, there will still be many children who will seldom, or never, enter a school door. A universal system of compulsion has not yet been enacted by Parliament, still the principle is embodied in the recent Education Act. You know that the power of compulsion is vested in the School Boards, but only as a permissive privilege. There is no doubt that the Boards of our large towns will avail themselves of it, but that every School Board will enforce the attendance of the children is by no means probable. In agricultural villages, where the Board would consist mainly of farmers, I fear the question of compulsion will be shelved.

A gradual change is manifest in public opinion, as expressed in the daily journals, upon this subject, and many influential advocates for its adoption are now to be found. Mr. Forster, Mr. Stansfield, and Mr. Mundella recently publicly spoke of

its necessity, and if the present Cabinet remain in office, I do not think we shall wait long for legislation on it. I argue from the fact that since the Government demands school accommodation for one-sixth of the whole population to be provided everywhere, when the buildings are erected, they will find some means of filling them. I think it is a fair deduction that since compulsion is applied to the buildings it will eventually be applied also to the children. As it is, in parishes where no School Board now exists, and in many instances, where they do, or will exist, the education of the children will not be advanced a single iota by the present Bill. The children in these districts who now grow up in ignorance will still remain uneducated. But, I believe, that if it is found that the School Boards in our large towns can compel the children to attend school, there will be a universal cry for compulsion arise in our land. The Factory Act has done much towards giving many children an education. The Act itself is a species of indirect compulsion. Its extension to all parts of the Kingdom and to all kinds of labour in which children are employed would do much to force many into our schools. If it were made penal for an employer to give children under thirteen work of any kind, unless they attended school a certain number of times in the year, the selfishness of the parents would at once be appealed to, and selfishness is a potent motive power in human nature. For their own interests, many would send their children to school merely that their little ones might occasionally obtain employment. A system of indirect compulsion such as this, would no doubt be very beneficial, and would cause many children to receive an education who are now allowed to grow up in ignorance. But still it would be by no means effectual. The education of our country would not be national in the true sense of the word. It would not touch our city Arabs, or the dregs of our towns and villages. I do not believe we can do without, or that we shall be very long without, a direct system of compulsion which shall affect all the children of the poor, and yet not such a rigid schemae as would entirely deprive the parents of the wages of their children. But the question naturally arises—How can this be accomplished?

In my opinion, no act of compulsion could be so framed as to be universally applicable without in some instances being detrimental to those interests of the poor which we are bound to respect. For the peculiarities of child-labour vary in

different localities. If a law were passed compelling all children to attend, say one hundred days in the year, how could it be enforced? I would suggest the following plan:— Let Parliament cause a School Board to be formed in every place, where under the present Act none need now exist, and let each board be compelled to frame a system of compulsion adapted to the requirements of the locality, and which system shall cause every child within its jurisdiction to attend school a certain number of times in the year. Of course I do not advocate that these Boards should possess the power of rating, &c., when the schools are well supported voluntarily, but they should merely have the power of compulsion. I believe that such Boards, acquainted as they would be with the local necessities and requirements of their several districts, could overcome all the difficulties which might exist in the enforcement of compulsion. They should have the power of saying to the parents, “We will compel you to send your child to school (say one hundred days in the year). If you wish to obtain employment for him when child-labour is demanded, you can do so, but we will regulate the length of the time he is to be absent from school. You may send the child to any efficient school you please, if there be more than one in the parish, but if there be only one, whether belonging to the Church or Dissent, you must send him there, and we will see that no religious dogmas distasteful to you are taught to your child. If you cannot afford to pay the school fee, and we shall know, being residents of the parish, we will pay it for you out of the poor rate, but in this case you will be regarded as a recipient of parish relief.” All that refuse to send their children to school ought to incur certain penalties, as if they wilfully deprived their offspring of food.

You see, then, that I would give to the School Boards the following powers:—

1.—They should be able to compel all parents and guardians to send their children to some efficient school; and lest the so-called “religious difficulty” should be an impediment to united action, the parents must be allowed to possess perfect liberty in the choice of the school. In cases where only one school exists in a parish, no matter of what religious denomination it may be, the children must be sent there, and it would be the duty of the Board to see that the provisions of the Education Act as regards the religious instruction are stringently enforced. If, when this is carried

out, there is found to be insufficient accommodation in any particular school, the denomination to which it belongs must enlarge their buildings, supposing there is no room elsewhere within a reasonable distance, or a rate school must be established by the Board. This plan, I think, will be reasonable and equitable; for if the denominationalists wish to retain their schools, they should be compelled to keep pace with the requirements of their several districts; and that they would do so I believe there is very little doubt.

2.—They should have power to regulate the duration of time when the children should be absent at work, subject to a fixed number of annual attendances.

3.—If the parents are so poor as to be unable to pay the school fee, the Board should be allowed to pay it out of the poor rate. This mode of payment would prevent the privilege being abused, for the honest and upright among this class regard it as a great stigma to receive "parish relief" unless they are absolutely compelled.

4.—All persons who neglect to send their children to school, the Board should have power to summon before the magistrate. The punishment should be a fine varying from one shilling upwards. To this, it has been objected, that the poverty of many of the parents will make the imposition of the fine useless, as they would be unable to pay it. But, I believe, the universal dissemination of the fact that the parents commit a criminal act when they deprive their children of education, will have a most deterrent effect; so that offences of this character will soon become uncommon. In Switzerland, out of three thousand parents, only forty were punished for educational offences in eight years.

Lawless children who defy the authority of their parents, and of the Board, should be sent to Industrial Schools. Far better this, than that their wayward wills, unchecked by any restraint, should make the lives of these children a curse to themselves, their parents, the neighbourhood where they dwell, and eventually, in all probability, a curse to their country. The children of professional vagrants should be similarly dealt with, while the children of gipsies and other nomads should be compelled to attend school during the time they are encamped in any locality.

I need not say much to you teachers on the advantages of compulsory education. Almost every child would then be educated, and the education of our country would indeed be national. The poor would not only have—as, alas! too

many have now—simply their carnal senses as a means of enjoyment, but their mental faculties would be developed, and the vast storehouses of knowledge to which only educated persons have access, would be open to all. Then I believe we should see less vice, less drunkenness, and less poverty. Men would become better parents and better citizens. Besides this, the advancement of science and its application to almost all kinds of labour demands from a man in these days not merely strength, but skill. In the use of our military weapons and in the modern modes of warfare, we require not only animal courage and dogged perseverance, but the cultivated intelligence of educated men. We have seen this wonderfully exemplified in the educated soldiers of victorious Germany. But are our recruits, many of whom are “the dregs of society,” educated men? Let us have compulsory education, and then I think greater influence and greater prosperity will eventually accrue to our country.

We, as teachers, know too well, and more especially those who have schools in agricultural districts, that the greatest obstacle to our successful teaching is the irregularity of the attendance of the children. How different would be the aspect of our schools, and how much more could we teach, if this difficulty were surmounted. Let theoretical educationists aver that physical science and other cognate subjects should be taught in our elementary schools, and let cynical writers assert that our schools are below the standard imagined in their impractical mind ; but as long as the normal average of attendance remains at two-thirds of the number on the books, and as long as the majority of our children are allowed to leave school before they are eleven years old, the educational standard must be low, and the curriculum of instruction must be mainly confined to the essential R's.

Therefore, in conclusion, I would say to all teachers who wish to magnify their office, and to all those who earnestly desire the education of the poor as a means to enhance the reputation and prosperity of our noble empire, endeavour to obtain a universal system of compulsory education.











